

Framing Social Issues for Public Understanding and Support

Uniting For Early Childhood
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FrameWorks Institute



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Goals for This Presentation

- Review the research and theory that support Strategic Frame Analysis.
- Review eight “Framing Lessons” to improve communications about social issues.
- Set the stage for further learning about ECD messaging.

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Why Does Communications Matter?

- It determines the public agenda.
- It directs the thoughts and actions of policymakers and influentials.
- It defines issues as public or private.
- It primes people for action or disperses accountability.
- It propels social movements.

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What is Communications?



- Speech to civic group
- TV interview
- Report
- Editorial/article in newspaper
- Fact Sheet
- Brochure
- Web Site
- Etc.

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What do we know about how communications works and how people think about social issues?



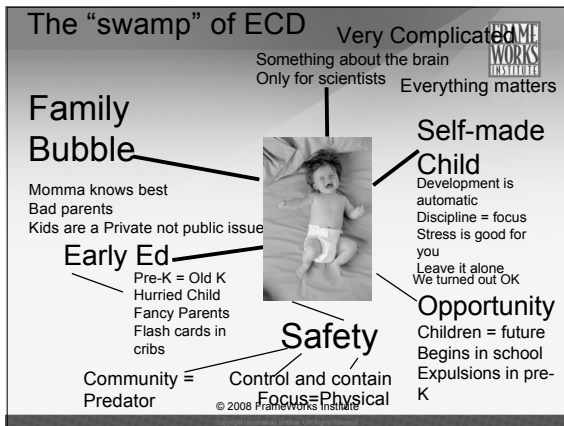


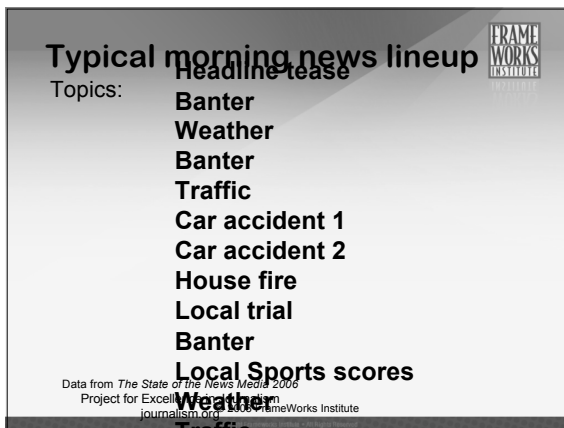
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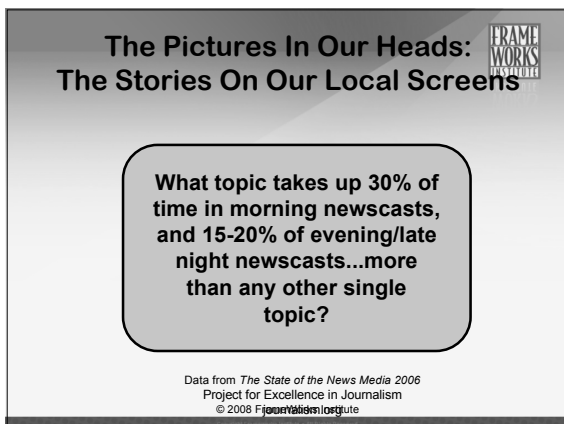
















Therefore...

- Persuasive communications cannot depend on simply putting information in front of people
- Issue awareness is not the (only) goal
- Communications must change the lens through which they see the information


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To change the lens, we have to understand how people process information

- People are not empty vessels; the mind is a swamp of hypotheses based on prior knowledge, experience and expectation
- These “schemata,” or frames, are activated when confronted with new or novel information

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To change the lens, we have to understand how people process information

- Frames are stubborn - they often persist even in the face of evidence to the contrary. WHY?
- Understanding is theory-based, not data-based; frame-based, not fact-based.

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The Cognitive Perspective

Issue

Visible
Attitude

Hidden Reasoning

What are they thinking?
What cultural models are they employing
to approach this issue?

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The Cognitive Perspective

Issue

Visible
Attitude

Safety frame

Black Box frame

Family Bubble frame

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The Perspective We Bring (Strategic Frame Analysis)

- People get most information about public affairs from the news media which, over time, creates a framework of expectation, or dominant frame.

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The Perspective We Bring (Strategic Frame Analysis)



- Over time, we develop habits of thought and expectation and configure incoming information to conform to this frame.

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The Perspective We Bring (Strategic Frame Analysis)



- People use established mental shortcuts to make sense of new information.

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The Work We Undertake with Policy Experts, Advocates and Scientists



- Annie E. Casey Foundation/ Kids Count – how to improve the status of children in 50 states
- Endowment for Health in NH, The California Endowment, California Wellness Foundation, St Luke's Health Initiative in AZ– how to change the public conversation about health care reform
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child – how to close the science-policy gap for young children

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The Work We Undertake with Policy Experts, Advocates and Scientists



- Union of Concerned Scientists/Suzuki Foundation (CA) – how to get people to understand global warming and its implications
- W. K. Kellogg Foundation – how to make the food system sustainable and healthy; how to increase public support for rural policies; how to talk about food and fitness
- Variety of funders - How to have a more productive conversation about race

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The Questions We Ask



- How does the public think about a particular social or political issue?
- Are there habits of thinking that are strongly entrenched, automatic?
- How do these default patterns influence and constrain public choices?

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The Questions We Ask




- How do these default patterns diverge from expert or scientific understandings of a problem, its causes and consequences?
- How are these default patterns reinforced or contested by advocates, journalists?
- How can an issue be communicated to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates alternative policy choices?

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The Question You May Be Asking:

How is this communications approach different from all other communications approaches?



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Different Approaches Promote Different Narratives About Solutions to Social Problems





Social Marketing:
Tell/teach/empower parents and kids to just say no, use peer pressure, etc.

Strategic Frame Analysis:
Expose the system of distribution that targets youth and explain the need for laws to protect young people from exploitation by irresponsible industries

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Strategic Frame Analysis: The methods we employ



Descriptive

- Identify the dominant themes in public thinking (meta-analyses of public opinion research)
- Identify frames in public use (media content analyses; content analyses of advocates' materials)
- Confirm and analyze effects of dominant frames (cognitive interviews, focus groups)

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Strategic Frame Analysis: The methods we employ



Prescriptive

- Test potential reframes (focus groups)
- Develop simplifying models/metaphors to refocus, distill expert knowledge ("Simplifying Models" research)
- Test promising reframes against controls to discern their impact on policies (priming survey)

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What is a Frame?



- The way a story is told - its use of values, context, metaphors, numbers, visuals, tone and messengers - that triggers the schema or cultural models that people use to make sense of their world.



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Building Effective Frames

Frames “fill in” missing information.

- ✓ What is this about?
- ✓ What is the problem?
- ✓ Who is responsible?
- ✓ What are the solutions?

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Why doesn't the Public take responsibility for social problems?

- People are selfish, small-minded, uncaring.

OR

- It's a cognitive rather than a moral failure – they don't understand what their responsibility could be.

Our perspective



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Framing and Reframing



- When communications is inadequate, people default to the “pictures in their heads”

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Framing and Reframing




- When communications is effective, people can see an issue from a different perspective.

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Framing and Reframing



- There are no frameless transactions: either you frame intentionally or the mind will fill in the blanks

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Building Effective Frames

Values

Context

Metaphors and Models

Numbers/Social Math

Visuals

Tone

Messengers

Solutions

Consistent Frame Challenges

- Little picture
- Individuals
- Self-limiting
- Problem definition as individual character, behavior
- Information is only answer (no agency)

- Big picture
- Ecologies
- Social cause + effect
- Problem definition is conditions affecting choices
- Engagement with policies can propel change

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Framing Lesson #1: Order Matters

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Order Matters

- Rebutting is NOT reframing.
- Once a frame is established, it will crowd out subsequent frames.
- You shouldn't repeat a bad frame or wait to kill it off.
- Don't lodge your reframe in the last paragraph

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Order Matters



"A debate is mounting over the causes of a tide of juvenile brutality that has terrorized the nation since 1985. Some of the nation's most influential crime experts blame ``super-predators" - young people predisposed to violence because of generations of poverty, fatherlessness, drug addiction and neglect. But a growing number of scholars believe the real culprit is the profusion of lethal weapons in the hands of children.

("Teen Crime: 'Predators' or Guns at Fault?"
June 3, 1996, St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN)

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MYTH "The flu isn't a serious disease."

FACTS Influenza (flu) is a serious disease of the nose, throat, and lungs, and it can lead to pneumonia. Each year about 200,000 people in the U.S. are hospitalized and about 36,000 people die because of the flu. Most who die are 65 years and older. But small children less than 2 years old are as likely as those over 65 to have to go to the hospital because of the flu.

MYTH "The flu shot can cause the flu."

FACTS The flu shot cannot cause the flu. Some people get a little soreness or redness where they get the shot. It goes away in a day or two. Serious problems from the flu shot are very rare.

MYTH "The flu shot does not work."

FACTS Most of the time the flu shot will prevent the flu. In scientific studies, the effectiveness of the flu shot has ranged from 70% to 90% when there is a good match between circulating viruses and those in the vaccine. Getting the vaccine is your best protection against this disease.

MYTH "The side effects are worse than the flu."

FACTS The worst side effect you're likely to get from a shot is a sore arm. The nasal mist flu vaccine might cause nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat and cough. The risk of a severe allergic reaction is less than 1 in 4 million.

MYTH "Only older people need a flu vaccine."

FACTS Adults and children with conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and kidney disease need to get a flu shot. Doctors also recommend children 6 months and older get a flu shot every year until their 5th birthday.

MYTH "You must get the flu vaccine before December."

FACTS Flu vaccine can be given before or during the flu season. The best time to get vaccinated is October.

"Myth and Fact" Doesn't Work



- People misremembered the myths as true.
- Got worse over time.
- Both older and younger readers made mistakes.
- Attributed false information to the CDC.

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“Myth and Fact” Doesn’t Work



- Denials inherently require repeating the bad information, which can paradoxically reinforce it.
- It is better to make a completely new assertion with no reference to the original myth.

(from Persistence of Myths Could Alter Public Policy Approach, Shankar Vedantam, Washington Post, September 4, 2007)

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Framing Lesson #2: Priming With Values Matters



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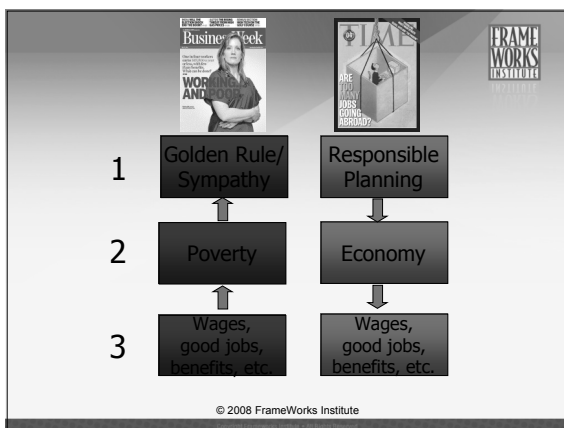
Priming with values matters



- START
- ↓
- FINISH
- Level One = **Values**, e.g., fairness, opportunity, interdependence, responsible management
 - Level Two = **Issue-categories**, e.g., health, education, the environment, the economy
 - Level Three = **Specific policy issues**, e.g., EITC, universal Pre-K, expanded SCHIP, rural development


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Context Matters

EPISODIC FRAMES

THEMATIC FRAMES



lens = telefocus

lens = wide angle


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Different Stories Set up Different Solutions


EPISODIC FRAMES	THEMATIC FRAMES
▪ Individuals	▪ Issues
▪ Events	▪ Trends over time
▪ Appeal to consumers	▪ Appeal to citizens
▪ Private	▪ Public
▪ Better information	▪ Better Policies
▪ Fix the person	▪ Fix the Condition

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Framing research shows that a **human interest story alone, especially the more vivid and detailed it is, will not lead people to conclude that a policy solution is required for an entire population.** More than likely, the case study or example will be interpreted as tragic or regrettable and worthy of sympathy or charity but without extension to public policy.

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Many Face Street as Chicago Project Nears End

NYT 8/7/03
 Sheba Lovia Hinkle, 33, moved into Wells in 1991 and was evicted a year later because of her boyfriend's drug dealing. But she stayed, shuttling with her six children among friends' apartments in the low-rise walkups that make up this sprawling development on the South Side.

And then there is Austin, 44, a heroin addict who grew up in Wells and recently hijacked a vacant unit. These illegal residents, along with many legal tenants who have large families with special needs or who have violated their leases, are among hundreds who could soon end up homeless as the housing authority's half-empty buildings are demolished to make way for mixed-income developments.

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Among about 2,000 legal residents, one in five have lease violations -- household members whose names are not on the lease. Others have families too big for the new development's units. One is Vickie Foxx, 31, who lives with her seven children in a five-bedroom spread. She has no desire to leave. "I've been here all my life -- I like my lakefront," she said. "That's where my family moments are at."

A half-step up from the squatters is Ms. Hinkle, who has spent more than a decade bunking with friends but is established enough to teach dance at the recreation center. The woman whose apartment she is sharing expects to get her Section 8 voucher and move out within a couple of months, leaving Ms. Hinkle and her six children, who survive on \$650 a month in food stamps, without somewhere to sleep. "I don't know what tomorrow holds," she said. "I feel like good things come to those who wait. I feel like it may be my turn."

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News Coverage Excerpts

from

Henry Horner

Video News Release & Press Conference

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The Henry Horner Mothers Guild

- How did they anticipate the swamp?
- How are the women framed?
- How do the metaphors assign responsibility?

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Framing Lesson #4: Metaphors and Models Matter



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Translating Expert Knowledge

- ▶ Experts often assume the public shares their understanding of HOW a problem works
- ▶ Experts assume an understanding of the relationship between cause and effect
- ▶ Unless the mechanism of problems is made explicit, people default to their pre-existing cognitive models



Metaphors and Models Matter

- “*Simplifying models*” convey the essence of an expert understanding into easily accessible analogies.
- When people understand HOW something works, they are better inoculated against SPIN.

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Metaphors and Models Matter

- Simplifying a complex problem by use of an analogy helps people understand new information in a context they already know as familiar.

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What is a Simplifying Model?

A simple concrete analogy that conveys the essence of an expert understanding...

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Analogyes, Metaphors, Models

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ATMOSPHERE

SUN

GREENHOUSE GASES

EARTH

Some solar radiation is reflected by the atmosphere and earth's surface:
Outgoing solar radiation:
103 Watt per m²

Some of the infrared radiation passes through the atmosphere and is lost in space

Net incoming solar radiation:
343 Watt per m²

Some of the infrared radiation is absorbed and re-emitted by the greenhouse gas molecules. The direct effect is the warming of the earth's surface and the troposphere.

Surface gains more heat and infrared radiation is emitted again

Solar energy is absorbed by the earth's surface and warms it... and is converted into heat causing the emission of longwave (infrared) radiation back to the atmosphere

Net outgoing infrared radiation:
343 Watt per m²

Net incoming solar radiation:
343 Watt per m²

Outgoing solar radiation:
103 Watt per m²

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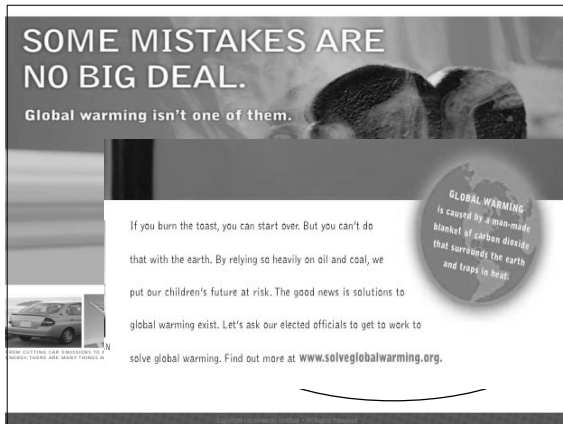
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SOME MISTAKES ARE NO BIG DEAL.

Global warming isn't one of them.

If you burn the toast, you can start over. But you can't do that with the earth. By relying so heavily on oil and coal, we put our children's future at risk. The good news is solutions to global warming exist. Let's ask our elected officials to get to work to solve global warming. Find out more at www.solveglobalwarming.org.

GLOBAL WARMING is caused by a man-made blanket of carbon dioxide that surrounds the earth and traps in heat.




Metaphors and models teach the mechanism


Scattered or complex info → clear picture

- Opens the door to new information
- Lasting knowledge vs transient arousal
- Causally connects humans to the problem


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Framing Lesson #5: Social Math Matters



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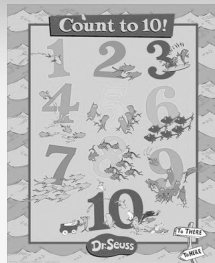


What is “social math”?



Social math is a way to explain complex data and large numbers so that people can easily understand and remember it by creating visual pictures in their heads.

(Concept developed by Berkeley Media Studies Group and The Advocacy Institute)



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Using Social Math



- To compare the size of two things
- To make an abstract issue more concrete
- To create relationships between familiar and unfamiliar objects or issues

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With Social Math




While most Americans expect their standard of living to increase over time as their wages rise and savings accumulate, the assets of the least affluent dropped by almost half between 1983 and 2001. Instead of the water level in the harbor rising gradually to lift all boats, the 40% of American households with the least resources to start with found their boats high and dry.



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Without Social Math

Between 1983 and 2001, the net worth of the least affluent 40 percent of American households fell by almost half. Today, 20 percent of children in the United States live in households at or below the federal poverty level. Between 1983 and 2001, the net worth of the least affluent 40 percent of American households fell by almost half.




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What We Are Using Social Math to Do

- Keep the focus on the trend, but eliminate confusing list of statistics which invokes both crisis and naturalism.
- Introduce a simple, well-known metaphor about the economy (“a rising tide lifts all boats”) that is descriptive of the problem and inclusive of all Americans.

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Framing Lesson #6: Tone Matters



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Reasonable or Rhetorical?



- **Reasonable mode:** more open to new information and to problem-solving.
- **Rhetorical mode:** more overtly political or ideological. Reminds people of their hardened positions and political identities.

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How Reasonable Tone Works



- When people are presented with a reasonable discussion of the problem, its causes and the potential solutions, they are much better at listening to and using new information.

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How Reasonable Tone Works



- Their “Villager” instincts kick in and they begin thinking about how to solve the problem rather than how to identify the hidden agendas of the messengers. Engaging Americans in “can do” thinking is especially effective.

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How Rhetorical Tone Works



- Rhetorical tone communicates the frame "politics as usual."
- There are very few positive frames associated with politics.



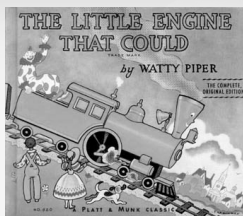
How Rhetorical Tone Works



- Using a rhetorical tone communicates that this is about the old political game of them vs us.
- In order for your audience to decide how to process your communication, then, all they have to do is decide whether or not they agree with you.

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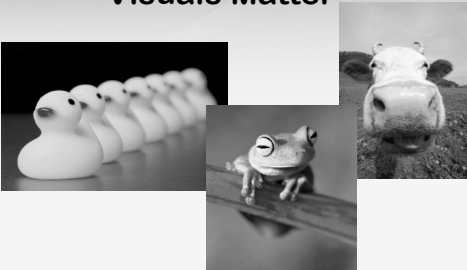
Chicken Little




The Little Engine that Could

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Framing Lesson #7: Visuals Matter




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Visuals and Messengers Matter

- Visuals should support, not undermine, your frame.
- Who is in the picture?
- Do they say “systems” not “sympathy”?

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**Framing Lesson #8:
Messengers: The Unlikely
Allies**

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Messengers Matter

- Use “Ordinary People”
- Use Unusual/Unexpected Allies
- Use spokespeople not perceived as having a vested interest
- Make sure messengers are briefed and prepared

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Consistent Problems in Framing



- Under-reliance on values to prime perspective or limited set of values (sympathy, charity, consumer/self-interest, crisis).
- Focusing first or exclusively on individuals.

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Consistent Problems



- No mental short-cut or organizing principle, or ineffective one; nothing new or memorable transmitted.
- Over-reliance on numbers as tools of persuasion

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Consistent Problems



- Lack of attention on explaining how the problem works, on causal stories and mechanisms.
- Insufficient emphasis on problem-solving and solutions, or too little too late.

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What Must Our Communications Convey?



- Provide strong alternative way of seeing the problem, prime it with values
- Resist temptation to make sympathy/charity/crisis the motivation
- Appeal to people as problem solvers

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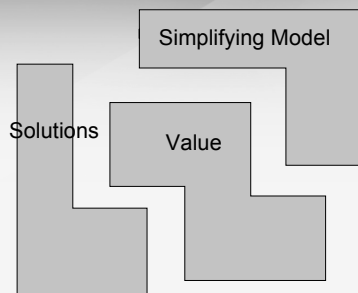
What Must Our Communications Convey?



- Make the system the problem, not the people
- Surface solutions high in the message
- Don't shame, blame, guilt-trip, factionalize or partisanize


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Key Frame Elements



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